

OFFICE OF HOMELESS YOUTH STRATEGIC PLAN

VISION

Every family and youth in Washington State has the individualized support they need so that no young person has to spend a single night without a safe and stable home. Every community has services that are equitable, accessible, effective, responsive, and coordinated.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Advance approaches that are data-driven and evidence-based
- Identify and eliminate gaps in services and funding
- Involve youth voice
- Value experiences of youth and families
- Promote accountability in all policies and programs
- Be responsive to wherever a young person is at in their experience of homelessness
- Be locally-focused and support the ability of youth to remain in their community
- Recognize that not all parents reject their kids and that not all kids can return home safely
- Promote services that are youth-centered and individualized
- Be culturally responsive and reflect the needs of local communities
- Foster coordination between funding and systems
- Support an approach that is hopeful and believes in possibility

SCOPE OF THIS PLAN

This plan initiates a strategic approach to prevent and end youth homelessness in Washington state. It defines the outcomes we are aiming for, the strategies to achieve them, and the performance measures to tell us if it's working. The recommendations serve as a roadmap for the Governor, Legislature, and state leaders.

Housing is a fundamental component of stability for a young person, yet housing alone will not support the transition to a healthy, productive adulthood. A more holistic approach is warranted to provide young people with the educational, emotional, and safety supports needed for positive adolescent development.

This plan outlines strategies across a broad framework to address youth homelessness. As prescribed by the *Homeless Youth Act*, it addresses the following five key components:

1. **Stable Housing** - Every youth has a safe and healthy place to sleep at night.
2. **Family Reconciliation** - Families are reunited when safe and appropriate.
3. **Permanent Connections** - Youth have opportunities to establish positive, healthy relationships with adults.
4. **Education and Employment** - Youth have opportunities to advance in their education or training and obtain employment.
5. **Social and Emotional Well-Being** - Youth have access to behavioral and physical health care; services nurture each youth's individual strengths and abilities.

While the Office of Homeless Youth serves as the platform, strategic director, and system-level owner for addressing youth homelessness, this plan touches on the policy, practice, and funding changes needed from all corners of state government. Success in these efforts will require shared leadership and action from multiple public systems such as child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and behavioral health.

What does it mean to end youth homelessness?

This plan outlines the strategies necessary to ensure that no young person has to spend a single night without a safe and stable place to call home. It does not propose to eradicate all of the underlying factors that may lead to homelessness, such as family conflict, poverty, or mental illness. Rather, the strategies are aimed at providing both interventions to families and youth who are at risk of experiencing homelessness and a response system for those who experience homelessness. We anticipate the need for an ongoing community response system to intervene when family conflict occurs, when a youth runs away or is rejected from their home, when a young person faces a health or safety risk, or faces any kind of housing instability.

TERMINOLOGY

Homeless Youth: Throughout this report, the terms “homeless youth” and “youth” are used to refer to the population age 12 through 24, who are living on their own, without a parent or guardian, and are without a safe, stable living arrangement. Implementation of programs and strategies often requires segregation between age groups. When relevant, the distinction is made between youth (under 18) and young adults (18 through 24).

Homelessness: Consistent with the authorizing legislation (2SSB 5404), this plan assumes the definition of homelessness set forth in the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. According to that definition, youth are homeless if they “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” This includes youth sleeping in emergency or transitional shelters, on the streets, in cars, parks, abandoned buildings, or other unsafe, unstable places. Also included are youth who are “couch-surfing” or “doubled-up.” Couch surfing occurs when a youth finds

temporary shelter with friends or other family members, but lacks a permanent or stable home. Doubled-up scenarios involve situations where a youth is sharing housing with others due to loss of housing. Couch-surfing is a doubled-up experience, as well as any experience where a youth has no legal right to stay. (Federal definitions of homelessness are included in the Appendix X)

Unaccompanied: Used interchangeably with “homeless youth,” unaccompanied means a youth or young adult experiencing homelessness while not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

NOTE: Gray text indicates areas identified as important during 7/14 Advisory Committee meeting

Report references:

Noble: Noble, Courtney. *Youth Homelessness Landscape in Washington*, June 2016. [This report will be distributed to the Advisory Committee the week of July 4th](#)

MN: *Heading Home, Minnesota’s Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness, 2016-2017*

http://www.headinghomeminnesota.org/sites/default/files/MHFA_FULL.pdf

CROSS-CUTTING PRIORITIES

Cross-cutting priorities are those that are applicable across all strategies and recommendations. They represent core elements of a successful community response system to prevent and end youth homelessness.

EQUITABLE OUTCOMES

Access to services and positive outcomes should not differ depending on a young person’s zip code, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity. To ensure equitable outcomes we need to:

- Increase the **cultural competency** of state agencies and service providers in responding to homelessness
- Adopt an **equity impact tool** to evaluate policy and fiscal proposals
- Allocate **designated funding** for services and interventions targeted to LGBTQ youth and youth of color.
- Adopt and implement a set of protocols and best practices for **serving youth of color and LGBTQ youth**. Look to models currently being developed: The Center for Children and Youth Justice is developing protocols to guide youth-serving professionals to better identify, engage, and serve LGBTQ youth. The Northwest Youth Network is conducting an assessment on the needs of youth of color to understand how best to serve the population.

- **Expand services to all counties of the state** so that youth do not have to leave their own community to seek services. Develop a shelter and crisis intervention model for rural communities who don't have the capacity to obtain and staff a facility.
- Provide **technical assistance** to smaller communities to equip them with the skills and resources needed to effectively serve homeless youth in their community.

DATA QUALITY

Data collection and quality is essential to our ability to measure outcomes, understand causes and characteristics of youth homelessness, identify gaps in services, and target resources. Steps that need to be taken to improve data quality include:

- Allow minors to provide **written consent** to share their information in HMIS
- Publish OSPI data on homeless students annually, rather than biannually
- Improve integration of **county detention data** to increase understanding of the prevalence of youth discharged into homelessness, including those who go from detention to temporary beds at CRCs and/or homeless youth shelters. If data integration is not possible, require reporting on each county's release of youth from detention to shelter or unknown destinations. (Noble)
- Explore real-time **data sharing options** for youth involved in the juvenile justice, child welfare, and education systems to increase case coordination. This could include joint assessment and services planning for cross-over youth (Noble)
- Standardize and publish an **annual statewide count** of unaccompanied homeless youth

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

A strong, skilled, and supported workforce is needed to provide the best care, continuity, and services for homeless youth. Strategies that support a healthy workforce include:

- Increase **support for homeless youth line staff**. High staff turnover rates can be disruptive for clients and detrimental to an organization's ability to provide consistent quality interventions. By providing greater supervision and 24-7 access to crisis services, staff would likely last longer and do better (Noble)
- Provide **training to staff** on best practices of care including harm reduction, trauma informed care, and positive youth development.
- Increase **wages salaries, and benefits** of direct service staff to meet regional costs-of-living and be competitive with other professions.
- Increase state funding and **payment rates to youth-service providers** to support adequate levels of staffing and higher wages for staff.
- Increase the workforce of **behavioral health specialists** trained to work with adolescents. Provide youth with access to a behavioral health specialist at any place where they are being served, including schools and along the homeless service

continuum. [pg 15 of Noble report has a diagram of how to integrate BH in the homeless youth continuum]

SHARED STATEWIDE GOALS AND OUTCOMES

Achieving the vision that all youth and young adults have a safe, stable place to call home will require shared goals and accountability across state systems. Strategies to accomplish that include:

- Centralize the strategy and funding to end youth homelessness within the OHY and provide authority and **funding to the OHY to grant resources to other public entities** to prevent exits to homelessness.
- **Adopt and measure a shared goal** in Results Washington that no state system discharge youth into homelessness.
- Establish a **Governor's Cabinet on Youth Homelessness** or **Interagency work group** to promote accountability, improve efficiency, and establish strategic collaboration in the effort to end youth homelessness across state government.
- Use a wrap-around and **integrated service delivery system** that includes case managers across the different domains of behavioral health, education, housing, and employment.

REMOVE SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO SERVICES

Even when housing, jobs, and services are available, young people often face barriers to accessing them. Strategies to remove barriers that stand in the way of young people getting the support they need include:

- Modify laws to allow **juvenile records to be sealed**
- Address barriers to employment and housing by youth with **criminal records**
- Make **legal advocacy services** available to youth and families
- Help young people **obtain documentation**, such as SSN, birth certificates, state IDs
- Provide **cross-system navigators** to help youth access services

OUTCOMES AND STRATEGIES

STABLE HOUSING

Results:

HOMELESS YOUTH HAVE A SAFE & STABLE PLACE TO SLEEP EACH NIGHT UNTIL PERMANENCY CAN BE REACHED.

NO YOUTH DISCHARGED FROM A PUBLIC SYSTEM OF CARE WILL BE DISCHARGED INTO HOMELESSNESS

Indicators:

- ↑ Exits to safe and stable housing (HMIS)
- ↓ Number of new homeless (Basic Food report, PIT count)
- ↓ Returns to homelessness (HMIS)
- ↓ Length of time homeless (HMIS)
- ↓ Number discharged to the street from public systems (RDA annual report, TBD)

Strategies:

1. Expand outreach efforts to identify and engage homeless youth

- Target outreach efforts to youth in schools, juvenile justice facilities, safe place sites, rural areas and to subpopulations such as trafficked youth, LGBTQ youth, youth of color, and pregnant or parenting youth
- Expand eligibility for Street Youth Services up to age 24

2. Expand housing options to meet the individual needs of youth and communities

- Develop and fund an emergency housing model for rural communities (for example, Host Homes)
- Promote low barrier shelter practices that make services more accessible to the hardest to reach youth
- Expand transitional housing options for young adults, such as rental assistance programs
- Prohibit discrimination against renters based on their source of income or youth status
- Expand eligibility requirements (and funding streams) for beds and services currently limited to foster youth (such as IYHP, RLSP, Independent Living, Extended Foster Care) to serve a broader population of youth experiencing homelessness. (Noble)
- Develop housing designed for youth with unique needs such as homeless youth who are parenting, youth who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation, and LGBTQ youth.
- Improve licensing options and standards. Assess whether current licensing requirements and standards used for shelters, host homes, and extended foster care placements are appropriate and overseen by the appropriate body (Noble)

3. Prevent exits to homelessness for youth involved in public systems

- Implement a risk assessment and referral process for youth in public systems of care. For youth under the care of another public system, institute a standardized assessment tool to identify youth at risk of homelessness and a streamlined process to connect them to services.
- Require transition plans for youth that include definitive stable housing (i.e., an actual address), an education/employment plan with meaningful steps for achieving goals, contacts for the youth for relatives and other individuals in the community who have been identified as adult resources for the youth, and a completed independence check-list (addressing issues such as a clean credit report, legal documents in-hand, including identification and birth certificate, and a bank account has been established).
- Require that courts not dismiss a dependency without a transition plan that identifies definitive stable housing (CLS).
- Expand options to enroll in Extended Foster Care (EFC). Allow participants to opt-in to EFC any time up to age 21, and allow youth to qualify if they were formerly a state dependent but not a dependent at the time of enrollment.

YAEH Recommendation

Topic: Eliminating Youth Detention for Status Offenses and Expanding Family Reconciliation Services

The Tacoma Chapter wants to eliminate use of the Valid Court Order Exception in Washington state that allows juvenile detention for status offenses. In addition, the Chapter is advocating for funding to restore and expand the Family Reconciliation Services program to prevent juvenile detention and provide families with supportive alternatives. Status offenses only apply to youth under 18, and punish young people for actions like running away or breaking curfew. Washington detains youth for status offenses more than any other state in the country. Studies have found that juvenile detention usually increases the severity of problem behaviors and can increase the chances that the youth will be detained or incarcerated in the future. Juvenile detention can also worsen mental illness and put youth at greater risk for self-harm. By prioritizing early intervention and reconciliation, and eliminating the practice of detaining minors for status offenses, the state could save money and ensure better outcomes for at-risk youth and their families.

FAMILY RECONCILIATION

Results:

HOMELESS YOUTH UNDER 18 ARE REUNIFIED WITH FAMILY WHEN SAFE AND APPROPRIATE

YOUTH UNDER 18 WHO CANNOT RETURN HOME ARE PROVIDED SAFE, SUPPORTIVE, AND STABLE HOUSING

Indicators:

- ↑ Number receiving reconciliation services (HMIS- program specific)
- ↑ Number reunited with family (HMIS)
- + Response rate and outcome from DSHS for youth in shelter whose parents are unreachable or refuse to pick them up (HMIS)

Strategies:

Strategies apply to youth under age 18

1. Improve and expand family reconciliation services:

- Conduct an evaluation of the availability, accessibility, and effectiveness of the Family Reconciliation Services program to ensure we are providing adequate services to families in crisis.
- Examine other models of family reconciliation and methods of delivering services, such as building the capacity of youth service providers to contract or have on staff a licensed family therapist so that services are more directly available.
- Include a mental health evaluation as part of reconciliation services.
- Ensure reconciliation services are proficient in helping LGBTQ youth reconcile with family.
- Automatically provide a reconciliation assessment and services to youth accessing HOPE Centers and CRCs, and families with a CHINS petition.

2. Provide crisis intervention services to families and youth:

- Support families by assisting them in accessing and applying for other public benefits such as food stamps, TANF, disability, SSI, physical and behavioral health, or other benefits
- Increase funding and support services that are available to family/kin and other natural supports that would result in youth being able to remain housed with their family/kin/natural supports. (Noble)
- Establish a crisis hotline for families in conflict to address underlying issues and keep youth off the streets. Cocoon House's Project Safe is a best practice model that provides phone consultations, educational tools and a support group for parents.
- Utilize Crisis Residential Centers to serve families who need respite and support services to reconcile.

3. Build the capacity of the child welfare system to serve older adolescents:

- Build the authority and capacity of the child welfare system to assist older minors (age 15-17) who are homeless without parental care (MN)

- Strengthen the appeal process for eligible youth denied services through the child protective system (MN)
- Design and establish a response system to meet the specific needs of older minor youth who are homeless without parental support (MN)
- Provide flexible foster care options for 17 year olds (like EFC)
- Increase transitional living options for older adolescents age 16 and over who cannot return home due to safety issues and are deemed not appropriate for foster care. (for example, expand RLSP eligibility to include youth who meet this description)
- Increase overall foster care placements

PERMANENT CONNECTIONS

Result:

HOMELESS YOUTH HAVE HEALTHY, POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADULTS

Indicators:

- ↑ Number who have consistent case manager until stable housing/ independence is achieved (client survey, TBD)
- ↑ Number who can identify an adult they have a positive, healthy relationship with (client survey, TBD)

Strategies:

Promote healthy adult connections:

- Promote contacts with extended family, family friends, and family of choice
- Encourage, coordinate, and provide financial support for pro-social activities (i.e. service learning opportunities, educational workshops, trainings, etc.).
- Conduct assessments with youth that identify core strengths, skills, hobbies, and interests, and then match youth up with community mentors and opportunities in those interest areas. Match youth with existing mentorship/ positive development organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters and the Boys and Girls Club.

Increase continuity of case management:

Facilitate consistency of case managers as youth access multiple services. Promote stability by assigning a single case manager per youth.

EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT

EDUCATION

Results:

HOMELESS STUDENTS SUCCEED ACADEMICALLY & HAVE THE SKILLS THEY NEED TO BECOME INDEPENDENT AND SELF-SUFFICIENT

Indicators:

- ↑ High school graduation rates (OSPI)
- ↑ Academic testing scores (OSPI)
- ↑ Number enrolled and attending school (HMIS)
- ↓ Number with absenteeism, expulsions, suspensions, truancy (OSPI)
- + Self-sufficiency outcomes (HMIS- program specific)

Strategies:

1. Improve educational outcomes for students experiencing homelessness

- Expand housing options available through the Homeless Student Stability Program (HSSP) to connect unaccompanied youth with housing (host homes for example).
- Provide and implement consistent expectations and accountability for the McKinney-Vento school liaisons across districts (MN)
- Encourage adoption of trauma-informed discipline in high schools with elevated rates of homelessness and disproportionality (Noble)
- Require annual training of teachers and school administrators on identifying and referring homeless students

YAEH Recommendation

Topic: Educational Supports for Students Experiencing Homelessness

The Youth Advocates Ending Homelessness (YAEH) Chapter wants to improve high school graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness or housing instability by ensuring there is a trained point person in every school that can build relationships with young people, help identify homeless students, connect them with services, and create individualized support plans for their educational success. Furthermore, the Chapter proposes the state guarantee supplemental instruction and services to these students under the state's definition of basic education. Experts estimate there are over 8,800 unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness or housing instability in Washington's schools. These youths are more likely to fare worse on standardized tests, are disproportionately individuals of color, and are 240 percent more likely to drop out of school. Only 30 out of 295 school districts in Washington receive federal McKinney-Vento funding intended to meet the needs of homeless students, which YAEH members believe is insufficient. By providing funding for a point person in every school and prioritizing the needs of homeless students alongside other vulnerable student populations, the state can better provide youth the supports and tools they need to graduate at an equal rate with their stably housed peers.

2. Support homeless students in accessing and succeeding in higher education:

- Require higher education institutions to submit a plan to the WA Student Achievement Council on how to promote and support the admission and educational success of students experiencing homelessness
- Work with higher education institutions to develop a process to identify homeless students registered at their postsecondary institution, connect them to existing resources and track outcomes (MN). (Utilize the "Unaccompanied Youth Toolkit for Financial Aid Administrators" by NAEHCY)
- Support homeless students in applying for financial aid

3. Help homeless youth transitioning to adulthood obtain Independent living skills:

- Incorporate an independent living skills curriculum into programs that serve youth and young adults
- Expand the Independent Living Program to serve homeless youth ages 15 through 21

EMPLOYMENT

Result:

HOMELESS YOUTH OBTAIN EMPLOYMENT

Indicators:

- ↑ Number employed (HMIS)
- ↑ Availability of work and training opportunities provided by employers (WDC survey, TBD)
- ↑ Number participating in employment and training (HMIS)

Strategies:

1. Expand YouthWorks to connect more homeless youth to work-based learning and internships

Expand YouthWorks and target a portion of funding to serve unaccompanied homeless youth. Through YouthWorks, the state's 12 Workforce Development Councils implement programs that bring industry together with schools and youth service organizations to improve education and employment outcomes for young people with low-incomes.

YouthWorks achieves the following objectives:

- Provides opportunities for homeless YYA to enroll in programs that combine education and training, employment and job placement, and housing support
- Formalizes relationships and collaboration between youth service providers, schools, employers, and Workforce Development Councils to ensure YYA have access to education, training, and employment opportunities

2. Provide supports that make it possible for youth to get and keep a job:

- Expand transportation resources so youth and young adults can job search and get back and forth to work.
- Increase collaboration between youth service providers, DOL, SSA, and DOH to help youth acquire legal documents required to establish eligibility to work in the United States.

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Results:

HOMELESS YOUTH ARE HEALTHY PHYSICALLY, SOCIALLY, AND EMOTIONALLY

PROGRAMS FOR HOMELESS YOUTH IDENTIFY, ENCOURAGE, AND NURTURE EACH YOUTH'S STRENGTHS AND ABILITIES AND DEMONSTRATE A COMMITMENT TO YOUTH-CENTERED PROGRAMMING.

Indicators:

- ↑ Number covered by health insurance (HMIS)
- + Physical and mental health status (HMIS)
- ↓ Wait times for access to mental health and substance abuse treatment (DBHR request)
- ↑ Number of opportunities for clients to participate in program planning and policy development (client survey, TBD)

Strategies:

1. Improve access to mental health and substance abuse treatment:

- Increase the capacity of the behavioral health system to provide quick access to mental health and substance abuse treatment. Ensure access to a trained professional wherever youth are being served.
- Build the capacity of homeless youth providers to provide mental health services on-site (including during street outreach), either through mental-health professionals on-staff, or through enhanced partnerships with local behavioral health providers. (Noble)
- Support continued treatment and a supportive environment for youth exiting treatment facilities (such as Oxford housing)
- Scan chemical dependency residential facilities, waitlist lengths and transition plans for youth exiting these facilities. Determine barriers to creating a system of on-demand, developmentally appropriate detox treatment beds for youth.(Noble)
- Ensure mental health services for youth throughout the state are trauma-informed, strengths based, culturally competent and use a positive youth development framework (Noble)

2. Improve access to quality health care:

- Increase collaboration between homeless YYA providers and HCA in person assistors to help eligible youth sign up for health insurance, or train YYA providers to become in person assistors within their agencies.
- Help YYA identify and establish relationships with primary care providers that can address their healthcare needs
- Continue support for the 1115 Medicaid Transformation Waiver

3. Support youth engagement in programs and services

- Build infrastructure to allow homeless and formerly homeless YYA to provide input and leadership in systems reform and service programming.
- Allow YYA to be the architects of their future by providing case management tools, such as an “Individual Development Plan” for YYA to identify their goals and for service providers to build a plan of support and services to help youth reach their goals. Use our priority areas as the framework (stable housing; family reconciliation; permanent connections; education & employment, social & emotional well-being)